Sandwich as Aphrodisiac

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/222996.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Underage Sex

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Everwood

Relationship:
Bright Abbott/Ephram Brown

Characters:
Bright Abbott, Ephram Brown, Amy Abbott, Delia Brown, Andy Brown

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2003-10-10 Words: 5,031 Chapters: 1/1

Sandwich as Aphrodisiac

by pearl_o

Summary

The best way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

Notes

Kate, Molly, Fox, Jess and Livia all contributed a great deal to this story in different ways, and it's a much better story for all of their work. Happy Birthday, Val!

"So the one dude just starts, like, *whaling* on the other dude, right? So then the first dude decides to--"

Bright realized all of a sudden that Ephram really wasn't paying attention.

It was sunny and almost warm today instead of gray and drizzly like it had been, so they were sitting outside. Bright wasn't sure exactly when they had decided to start sitting together like this. But the more time he had been spending around the guys from the team, the more frustrating it got, even before the stuff started with Amy. And Amy and Laynie weren't really an option.

So ... apparently that left Ephram. Which was weird, he guessed, but okay.

Why Ephram was sitting with him was a whole other thing, but it probably didn't matter. It's not like Ephram would be sitting with anybody else.

"Decides to kiss him," Bright continued in his normal voice. Ephram was staring over Bright's shoulder -- he had sat so he had a direct line of sight to Amy, over at the corner of the lawn. Bright had sat where he couldn't see her on purpose. "And they start just, like, making out right there in the ring. Groping and everything. It was weird."

Ephram blinked and shifted his gaze back the few inches to Bright. "What?"

"Nothing, man," said Bright. He took another swallow of milk, finishing the carton and crushing it in his hand. "I'm messing with you. You want a pudding?" It was butterscotch day in the cafeteria today. He didn't even like butterscotch. Bright had only taken it because he thought it might be Ephram's favorite. He held it out to him as an offering.

Ephram eyed it a little suspiciously. "You know, if you want a favor, you can just come out and say it. I mean, I don't want to insult your negotiation skills, but pudding? Not that great a bribe."

Bright rolled his eyes. "It's not a bribe. I just thought you might want some pudding."

Ephram looked from him to the pudding and back.

"Look, if you don't want it, I'll just eat it myself. It's not a big deal or anything."

"No, I'll take it," Ephram said, reaching out and taking it from Bright's hands and looking back up at him. "Thanks."

Bright shrugged and unwrapped his second sandwich. He looked away back at the school as Ephram started to lick the lid of the pudding cup.

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"You've been here before, right?" Bright closed the door behind them.

Ephram was a few steps ahead of him, looking around the hall. "Once or twice, yeah." He was clutching his bag close. He looked weirdly out of place. More so than usual, even.

"Well, the living room's that way," Bright said, dumping his jacket on the railing of the stairs, "so you can go sit down if you want. I could go get some chips or something."

Ephram didn't say anything. Bright took that as a yes and went to the kitchen. There was a bag of Doritos on top of the fridge, so he dumped them into a bowl, and there were a couple of Cokes in fridge, so he grabbed two of those, too.

When he got back to the hall, juggling the food, Ephram was still standing there awkwardly like something was going to bite him. But Amy and Laynie were there, too, facing him.

"Uh. Hi," Bright said, looking back and forth between Ephram and the girls. Ephram looked embarrassed, and Amy just looked bitchy. Bright was pretty sure he'd missed something.

Amy's expression got even bitchier when she looked over at him and rolled her eyes. She huffed out a sigh and turned back to Laynie. "Come on, Laynie," she said. The girls stomped up the stairs without looking back.

Ephram was looking down at his feet and not saying anything. It was pretty annoying, actually.

"And Mom and Dad think she's the mature one," Bright said, after a couple seconds. Amy had been giving him the silent treatment for the past week. Mom and Dad both assumed it was his fault, and Bright

hadn't said anything different. It was quieter this way, anyway.

Ephram still looked like somebody had hit him with a car or something, though, and he hitched his bag up on his shoulder. "Look, this was a stupid idea. Maybe I should just go home."

Bright frowned. "I'm not keeping you here against your will or anything. It's a free country."

"Yeah," Ephram said, nodding. "I think I'll go."

He'd turned around, but Bright said, "I just think it's kind of dumb to leave just because Amy's being stupid." He shrugged. "I mean, it's not like she's queen of the world, you know? We could have a good time."

Ephram had turned back, and Bright had to wait a little bit longer before Ephram's face got this determined expression on it. "You know what? You're right." He took one of the sodas out of Bright's hand. "Let's just watch Spaceballs."

It was a little weird, watching it with Ephram. Ephram laughed at a lot of the boring bits and not at the stuff Bright liked, mostly, but sometimes it seemed like they were grinning at the same thing. It was odd, but not, like, bad odd.

They sat on the couch with the bowl of Doritos between them, and every once in a while Bright would look over see Ephram taking a handful of chips, or licking the flavoring off his fingers. It should have been gross, but somehow it wasn't.

*****

Ephram's room was weird -- different than Bright had expected, or something. It was still pretty nerdy, though.

He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, a pile of his comics -- manga, whatever -- beside him. Bright sat near him, leaning against the bed and stretching his legs out.

Ephram said, "So, uh, the basic storyline is there's this cop who used to be human. But she transferred into an android body, and now this weird artificial intelligence wants to merge with her and become, like, real. It's futuristic, really gritty..."

Bright wasn't actually paying much attention, because looking at Ephram's stuff and watching Ephram's hand gestures was more

interesting than actually listening to what he was saying.

"The movie's not really as good. They sort of took a lot of the humor out, the characters are a lot flatter... and you so don't care." Ephram set down the book and sat back.

"What?" Bright blinked quickly and looked back up at Ephram's face. Ephram looked kind of like he had just bitten into something really sour.

"Look, I know this is really lame, but you're the one who asked, all right?"

"Yeah. Uh -- sorry," Bright said, and Ephram rolled his eyes. Bright would have felt bad, but he really hadn't cared about the comic books. It had just been kind of cool to watch Ephram get all intense and geeky like that, like it was the most important thing ever. Bright had seen him like that over Amy once or twice last year, but it had just been annoying then, so this was different.

"Whatever." Ephram started to sort the comics into a pile. When he knelt up, Bright folded his legs up and leaned forward quickly to bump their mouths together.

It was an awkward angle, but Ephram's lips were warm and chapped beneath his, not slick at all, not like any of the girls Bright had kissed. What the hell are you doing?, he thought. And then: You're kissing *Ephram*?

The kiss was over before he could think anymore. Ephram was staring at him, almost out of breath.

Bright opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was "Sorry?"

Ephram raised his eyebrow and gave him this *look*, and then said, "You're sorry?"

"Yeah. You know, I don't know what you want me to say, dude--"

"I guess I was just wondering if, what, you just forgot about Amy?"

Okay, by now Bright was getting pretty annoyed. "No, I haven't, but maybe you should."

Ephram stood up, turning his back to Bright and sticking his hands

deep in his jean pockets. "Whatever."

"No, seriously. Do you have any grip of reality? She's not ever going to love you like she loved Colin, you know."

Ephram turned to face him again, and maybe he looked a little paler than usual. "You know what? Fuck you."

"She's not going to forgive you for trying to steal Colin away from her, either," Bright said, and he felt perversely glad when Ephram froze all over for a second.

"You don't have any idea what you're talking about," Ephram said, calmly, dismissively.

"Yeah? Don't I?" Bright stood himself, brushing off his jeans. "How did you think it looked to her? I mean, God. He didn't want his best friend, he didn't want his girlfriend. All he wanted was you. You think she's going to forget about that?"

"All Colin wanted was to be normal," Ephram said, and man, he looked really pissed now. "I didn't realize that trying to be someone's friend made you a gay pariah. I guess I do now." He walked over to his door and held it open. "Get out."

Bright rolled his eyes. "Dude, I--"

"Get *out*," Ephram repeated fiercely, and Bright frowned and left.

*****

By dinner time Bright felt a little dumb. He chewed on his broccoli and steak thoughtfully for a few minutes while his dad told a boring story about all the stupid people he'd had to talk to during the day and about how crazy Aunt Linda was. His mom said something polite but a little exasperated, and Amy just picked at her food the way she always did lately.

When everyone was quiet again, Bright said, "What do you when someone's mad at you, and you're not sure how to make them unmad again?"

Amy's head shot up from her plate, and she stared at him intently with a sharp look while their dad talked. Bright made his eyes big and crossed them at her.

"Well, Bright, that depends." Dad was cutting his steak into neat tiny pieces that all looked the same, and he tilted his head and gave Bright a short smile. "Were you right?"

"Yeah. I mean, I guess. Maybe." It was hard to tell. He thought he'd been right, but he'd been saying it more because he was mad and confused than anything else. It sucked now, either way.

"If you were right, then there's no reason to back down, son. You should wait for them to realize their mistake and make it up to *you*. Of course, if you were in the wrong--" Dad paused "--and I suspect that may be the case, then it's your responsibility to be the one humiliating himself."

Those options both kind of sucked, too, Bright thought. Because the chances of Ephram apologizing seemed pretty damn slim, but Bright wasn't about to go make a fool of himself, either.

"Oh, Harold," Mom said, throwing down her napkin with a huffy breath. "Bright, don't listen to your father."

Bright said, "Okay."

"Honey, sometimes it doesn't really matter who was right or wrong. It's just that one person has to be brave enough to make a gesture to make things right again. Most of the time the other person wants to have things okay again just as much as you do. It's people's pride that keeps them apart."

It sort of made sense, and it sounded a lot better than Dad's idea, at least. A gesture. Huh. He thought it over for the rest of dinner, as Mom talked about city hall and Amy mentioned her English test.

Amy caught him in the kitchen while he was loading his plate into the dishwasher.

She grabbed his arm and said, "I get it," in a really serious tone.

Bright furrowed his brow. "You get what?" He closed the dishwasher door and straightened up.

Amy sighed. "I get what you were saying at dinner."

"Oh. *Oh*," Bright said, stiffening as it sunk in. Amy didn't look pissed, though, or even freaked out. Mostly just weird and solemn. "Uh. How did you know?"

"Jeez, Bright, it's not like you used such an elaborate code."

"Oh," Bright said again, shifting uncomfortably. "So, uh, do you think Mom and Dad figured it out?"

Amy ignored that and squeezed his arm again. "I know that was your gesture. So, even though I'm still pissed at you and everything--"

"What?"

"Even though I'm still pissed," Amy continued, "I can forgive you." She smiled at him, and then turned and flounced out of the room.

Bright stood by the dishwasher for another minute, confused, but then he got it.

*****

The next morning he woke ten minutes before his alarm was set to go off. He lay in bed a couple of minutes, yawning, but it wasn't really worth it to go back to sleep, so he went straight into the shower.

Amy was eating oatmeal in the dining room when he got downstairs. "You're up early," she said mildly, and Bright grunted.

"I'm making lunch today." He stomped into the kitchen and looked around. Cookies, a bunch of cookies. He filled a bag up with those. Jello pack in the fridge, some apples, a couple of string cheeses.

He slapped together two ham sandwiches quickly, and packed them in a brown bag with the rest, but then he stopped before he put the bread away.

A gesture. Right.

Bright spread the mayonnaise carefully, not too thin, not too thick, even to the edges of the bread. Turkey instead of ham, maybe some cheese and mustard. A little lettuce, because Ephram seemed like that kind of guy.

It looked pretty good when he was done, and Bright actually felt a little proud of himself.

The only problem was that Ephram wasn't at lunch.

At least, he wasn't anywhere Bright could see -- not outside, not at the table he was usually at, not in the cafeteria at all. It was like he was

avoiding him.

Bright ended up eating at the jocks' table, but it kind of sucked. The guys were boring and he was thinking about something else the whole time. Plus, he had to eat the gesture himself.

*****

There were a bunch of lights on at the Browns' house, and there was classical music drifting out from the den. Piano, he guessed.

Bright was standing on the porch in front of the Browns' door. He smelled like lasagna, and he felt like a tool.

That last part was just getting worse the longer he stood here, though. Trying to do the stupid gesture was tool-like, but just standing around there like a stalker or something was worse.

"Retard," Bright muttered to himself. He moved the take-out bag from his right hand to his left and knocked on the door.

He could hear a voice cry out "I'll get it!" inside, and then the door swung open wide. The face was a lot father down than the one Bright had been expecting.

Ephram's little sister gaped at him open-mouthed.

"Uh, hi... Delia, right?"

She nodded slowly, like he was going to disappear if she made any sudden movements.

"Can I talk to Ephram?"

"Yeah--" Delia coughed, clearing her throat. "Um, yes. Just a minute, let me go get him." She closed the door bit by bit, keeping an eye on him for as long as she could till it shut.

Bright shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

The music from the other room stopped all of a sudden, and a few seconds later, the door opened again, just far enough for Ephram's face to peer out.

"Yeah? What do you want?"

Bright rolled his eyes. "Do you want to come out and talk?"

"Why would I?" Ephram said. He sounded a little like Amy did when she was younger and having one of her stupid sulky tantrums. When she knew it was stupid but didn't want to give in yet. Maybe that was a good sign.

"I brought eggrolls," Bright offered, and it felt good when Ephram cracked a relunctant smile. "Come on," he added. "I'm not going to bite you or anything."

They sat cross-legged over in front of the swing, leaning against the porch rails, and Bright split the eggrolls between them. There were three each.

They ate the first ones in silence. Bright watched Ephram bite into his second, and said, "So, are you still mad now?"

Ephram gave him an odd look as he chewed.

"I brought eggrolls," Bright said again, pointing. "It's, like, a gesture."

Ephram laughed, choking on the last bit of food in his mouth. "A gesture?"

"It was a pretty stupid fight."

Ephram's lips turned up a little.

"So?" Bright said, feeling a little impatient. The eggrolls had cost him money and everything, for one thing, and for another -- man. He didn't get Ephram at all.

"So," Ephram repeated. He paused and looked away. "So what was that, anyway, Bright? You trying to get back at me for last year?"

That seemed to prove Bright's point, though, because now he was just confused. "I don't usually kiss people to get *back* at them, dude. To get with them, maybe."

Ephram snorted. "You want to get with me."

"Has anyone ever told you you don't take hints that good?" Bright said, laughing. He punched Ephram lightly in the arm.

"Ow," Ephram said, but he didn't sound serious.

"You really didn't get it?"

Ephram smiled a little, more to himself than to Bright. "I think there's a lot of things I haven't been getting lately."

Bright's chest felt light and almost achy, and all of a sudden he couldn't stand it. But he couldn't move, not at all, not till Ephram looked up at him again, smiling at *him* this time.

And then he didn't know if it was him or Ephram, but it was probably him, and this time it was kissing for real. One of his hands was on the floor, propping him up, and the other was on Ephram's painfully warm neck. Ephram's fingers were hot, like a brand all the way through Bright's jacket, and his open mouth was hot, too, like it going to scald Bright's tongue, burn him or something.

There was a loud piercing shriek, and Ephram bit down hard on Bright's tongue and knocked their foreheads together with a crack.

"Shit," said Ephram. He scrambled to his feet.

"*Ow*," said Bright, rubbing his forehead.

"That was Delia at the window -- I really need to--" Ephram paused and looked down at him. "You should go."

"Yeah." Bright started to gather the eggrolls together.

"God, she's probably crying in there," Ephram said distractedly, looking toward the door. A thought seemed to strike him, and he glanced back. "I'm sorry. Uh, I could call you tomorrow?"

"That's fine," Bright said, getting to his feet.

"Okay, then." Ephram looked at him uncertainly. "Um. I'm really sorry." He put his hand over Bright's arm and squeezed, and then he disappeared inside.

Bright walked home, eating the rest of the eggrolls and feeling pretty content.

*****

The next day was Saturday. Bright was sitting on the couch, eating cereal and watching cartoons, when the doorbell rang.

"Door!" he yelled.

"Thanks, Bright, that's really helpful," Amy called back from the other

room.

"No problem!"

Amy appeared back in the doorway. "He's here to see *you*," she said a little disgustedly, and she moved aside to let Ephram in. He was standing awkwardly, hands in his pockets like he was scrunched in on himself.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Bright repeated, setting down his bowl on the coffee table.

Amy leaned against the doorframe and scowled at both of them. Bright stared at her, and then coughed really loudly and fakely when that didn't work. That got rid of her, though, because she rolled her eyes and left.

"Hey." Ephram nodded towards him. "Is your tongue and stuff okay?"

"Oh, that? Sure, it's fine," Bright said. "You want to sit down?"

"Thanks."

There were a couple of chairs in the room, but Ephram sat on the edge of the couch near him instead, which was kind of cool.

"So what happened with the ... stuff, from last night?"

Ephram let out a short unreadable laugh and shook his head. "God. I thought she was going to be traumatized for life, dude. Dad was already calming her down when I got inside, but she freaked out again when she saw me. Dad had to tell me to go away so he could talk to her."

"Jeez," Bright said. He was kind of impressed.

"Yeah. I guess he gave her the spying lecture and the realistic lecture -- she had this awful crush on you, man. I'm not sure what else he told her, but she came into my room later and sniffled and apologized and hugged me a lot." Ephram shrugged, and Bright found himself watching the movements in his neck.

It took a couple seconds, but then, "Wait. So, uh, Delia told your dad everything?"

"Apparently so."

There wasn't really anything to say to that but "Christ."

"I think he's saving *my* fatherly chat for tonight," Ephram added.

"He's not going to want to, like, talk to me, is he?" Bright said worriedly. It wasn't that he had anything *against* Dr. Brown, but that sounded like the kind of conversation he'd want to stay far, far away from.

Ephram looked amused. "Actually, he might. He ordered me to ask you over for dinner this week."

"Dinner?"

"Yeah, maybe you've heard of it? A table, people, eating of some kind?"

Bright was staring at him and thinking it over still when Ephram spoke up again.

"If you're worried about the food, I'll make sure it's edible, you know. He *can* do scrambled eggs, most of the time. Or he's good at calling Mama Joy's."

"No, it wasn't that, it was just--" Bright broke off, because he didn't know what he was going to say anyway. "Just, sure. I'll come over."

"Cool," Ephram said, looking surprised and maybe relieved. It made Bright want to kiss him again.

And it sounded like a good idea, and he could. So he did.

*****

Monday sucked. Quizzes in math *and* history. Nothing but the mystery meat food for lunch. Mr. Fenton made fun of him in sixth period and everybody laughed. And then when he was standing outside after school, waiting for Amy so he could go home, it started pouring hardcore out of nowhere, and he got wet.

He ducked into the truck as soon as possible, but he still got soaked. Amy showed up a good five minutes later, umbrella in hand, disgustingly cheery.

"Jeez, Bright, you look like a drowned rat."

Bright grunted so he wouldn't say anything stupid to her.

After they got home, he went up to his room and tried to work on the stupid confusing homework. It worked better when he gave himself a break every half hour or so to watch TV or read a magazine or something, but it still didn't work that well.

When he checked the clock again and it said close to five, he shut his books and changed his shirt. He played with his hair a little in the mirror before deciding he looked great and clomping down the stairs.

"I'm going over to a friend's house for dinner, Mom," he called from the front hall, and he could hear her sigh from the kitchen.

"You could give a little warning next time, Bright."

"Sorry!" He didn't see his jacket lying out. Dad probably put it away in the closet. He was always messing with stuff like that.

"Whose house are you going to?" Amy was standing behind him, giving him an odd look.

"Uh, Ephram's."

She made a hmmph noise, but Bright ignored her. He found the jacket near the back of the closet and slipped it on. His keys were still in the pocket.

He grinned at her. "See you later." He made his escape as quickly as possible.

It didn't take very long at all to get to the house. Bright didn't really need the truck at all, but it felt more comfortable that way. Like a big protective shell or something.

Of course, he couldn't *stay* there in the truck or anything if he wanted to actually go in. So much for that strategy.

Dr. Brown answered the door, and Bright stuck his hand straight out. "Good evening, sir."

Dr. Brown blinked at him a second, but then he smiled and shook his hand. "Good evening, Bright. Come on in." He led Bright inside, talking over his shoulder. "Dinner's almost ready -- Delia was just setting the table."

"We usually eat there," Delia said, and Bright turned around to see her in the corner, pointing at the big block in the middle of the kitchen.

"But Ephram said we had to eat at the table today like real people."

"Okay," Bright said slowly. Dr. Brown coughed.

"Ephram's in the den, if you could go tell him we're almost ready."

Bright followed his directions gratefully. Ephram was sitting on a piano bench, frowning at a pile of sheet music.

"Yo," said Bright, and Ephram jumped a little.

"Bright. Hey." He set down the papers and stood up, crossing the room.

"Your dad sent me to fetch you. Dinner's almost ready."

Ephram snorted. "I'm surprised he didn't trap you in there to hear stupid stories about me."

"Are they embarrassing ones?" Bright said, interested, but Ephram rolled his eyes.

"Come on."

Dinner was bizarre. Ephram was sitting across from him, so he had Dr. Brown one side and Delia on the other. Delia didn't say much, just kept alternating between watching her plate and staring directly at Bright curiously. It made him worry that he had something in his teeth.

Dr. Brown, on the other hand, kept asking him questions. Ephram kept making faces and looking like he wanted to beat his head on something.

"So now I'm mostly working on school and trying to get my grades up for college," Bright finished up. He took his last forkful of meatloaf, then looked back over at Dr. Brown. "Is there any more of this, sir? It's good."

Ephram gave him a disbelieving look. Dr. Brown's smile widened.

"Thank you, Bright, I'm glad you like it. Help yourself."

Ephram continued to look at him oddly after he took seconds. Bright gave him a *What?* look, and Ephram shook his head and went back to normal.

"Can you clear the table, Delia? I'd like to talk to the boys alone," Dr. Brown said, when they were all done.

Delia looked disappointed, but she said, "Sure."

Ephram slouched back in his seat and crossed his arms. Dr. Brown looked at him and frowned.

"I've already spoken to Ephram alone, but I wanted to let you know, Bright, that I don't have any objections to you two seeing each other--"

Seeing each other? Bright hadn't really thought of it that way. He glanced over at Ephram, but his eyes were closed like he was in pain.

"--but I do want to make sure you two are being safe. If you need anything, or you have any questions, you need to come talk to me or your father. You can't throw your lives away--"

Ephram's dad was talking about sex. Abou Ephram and *him* having sex.

Ooooh-kay.

He missed the end of what Dr. Brown was saying, till Dr. Brown turned to him and said, "Okay, Bright?"

"Uh, yeah," Bright said. "Sure."

Dr. Brown seemed pleased. "I'm glad you came over tonight, Bright."

Bright snuck another glance over at Ephram, who was watching him with a carefully raised eyebrow.

"Me, too," said Bright.

*****

Bright told Ephram he could come along and make out with him in the truck, but Ephram had snorted at him and closed the door. So he just went back home and worked on his homework some more.

After he finished, he lay on his bed and read one of his old Sports Illustrateds.

There was a knock on his door.

"I'm not here!"

"Bright, come on."

Bright huffed a sigh. "Fine."

The door opened, and Amy slipped in and sat on the end of his bed to face him.

"What do you want?"

"Why were you over at the Browns' tonight?" Amy sounded suspicious. Bright didn't really have any idea what she could be suspicious of.

He gave her a look. "Uh, I wanted to?"

Amy stood up all of a sudden, and walked over to his dresser.

"You've been spending a lot of time with Ephram lately," she said mildly, as she picked stuff up and put it down again.

"Yeah?"

"It's just interesting, that's all." She looked at him in the mirror.

Bright put the magazine down on his end table. "What are you trying to get at, Amy?"

Amy sighed a weird martyr sigh and twirled to look at him. "Look, Bright, if you're just doing this to annoy me or teach me a lesson, fine, I get it. You can quit now."

What the hell? He furrowed his brow and stared at her.

She sighed again, blowing out a long stream of air. "What?"

"Why is it everyone thinks I have these weird ulterior motives for everything? I mean, since when do I have ulterior motives? *Maybe*," he said slowly, enunciating, "*maybe* I just like him. Did you think of that?"

She squinted at him for a long moment, and then left without saying anything more. Bright picked up his magazine again and read some more.

*****

He was eating his noodles when Ephram hit his arm. When he turned to his right, Ephram was holding out a snack cake.

"My dad's lame -- he bought a big case of these, but Delia hates them. You want it?"

Bright looked from the cake to Ephram's face. "Thanks," he said, and he stuffed the whole thing into his mouth.

Ephram shook his head and looked away, but Bright thought he was probably fighting a smile.

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